

# USING PHOTOVOICE TO ENGAGE ORPHANS TO EXPLORE SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN AND AROUND A TOWNSHIP SECONDARY SCHOOL IN SOUTH AFRICA

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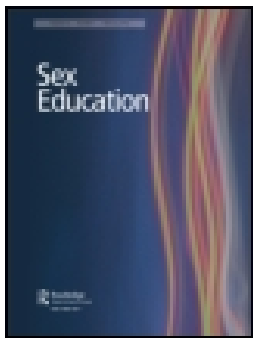
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# Using photovoice to engage orphans to explore sexual violence in and around a township secondary school in South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the vulnerability of orphans to sexual violence in and around their township secondary school. Using photovoice as a methodology with which to unearth these experiences and narratives, we examine how such an approach might engage the voices of orphans to inform thinking regarding sexual violence. Our analysis was informed by our desire to engage learners as critical and creative thinkers who are capable of grounding and thinking critically about their own issues. Findings highlight the vulnerability of orphaned girls both in and outside school. The photographs they produced demonstrate the pervasive nature of sexual violence directed against them. Photovoice enabled both ourselves and our participants to investigate experiences of sexual violence among orphaned learners. In particular, as a participatory visual method, photovoice facilitated the development of a transformative pedagogy in which we created a safe space for orphaned learners, a group that is often marginalised and silenced in many spaces to speak about their experiences. While many groups, particularly poor girls and women, experience high rates of sexual violence, the vulnerability of orphaned girls and boys is further increased by their social status within their families, communities and at school.

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Learners; orphans;  
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## Introduction

In this paper we focus on the vulnerability of orphans to sexual violence in and around their township secondary school serving the Inanda, Ntuzuma and Kwamashu (INK) townships in South Africa. We chose particularly to explore how learners experienced and understood sexual violence. Using photovoice as a methodology to unearth their experiences and narratives, we examined how this approach might engage the voices of orphans to inform thinking about sexual violence against vulnerable children.

Delany, Jehoma and Lake's (2016) review of the literature identifies three categories of orphanhood. The first of these refers to a maternal orphan as a child

whose biological mother has died but whose biological father is still alive; while the second refers to a paternal orphan as a child whose biological father has died but whose biological mother is still alive; and the third, a double orphan is a child whose both biological father and mother have died. Bringing these definitions together, Operario et al. (2011) define an orphan as being any child, under the age of 18 years, whose one or both of their biological parents have died. In this study, we worked with children who had lost both of their parents.

In South Africa, orphans are identified as a vulnerable population (Richter and Desmond 2008). The South African Child Gauge Report suggests that over 3 million children in the country are orphans (Delany, Jehoma, and Lake 2016). KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province, where this study was based, has the largest number (23 percent) of all orphans in South Africa (Da Lannoy et al. 2015). A significant number of these children grow up in poor conditions and have little protection against abuse and exploitation (Richter and Desmond 2008). This and the sheer number of orphaned children in the country warrant intervention, including at community, governmental, institutional and research levels.

Much early research on the education of orphaned children focused on their school enrolment (Ardington and Leibbrandt 2010). These studies found that orphans are less likely to attend school when compared to non-orphaned youth (Skinner et al. 2013). Further, orphans are at risk of poorer educational outcomes (Cluver et al. 2012). Of particular relevance to the present study, however, is emerging research which suggests that not only are orphaned adolescents most likely to have poor schooling prospects, including dropping out, they are also more likely than their non-orphaned peers to be sexually exploited and/or abused (Mkandawire, Luginaah, and Baxter 2014). Specifically, young orphans (both male and female) are more likely to have engaged in sex, with an average age of sexual debut at 13 years old, as compared to non-orphans, whose average age of sexual debut is 15 years (Thurman et al. 2006).

Moreover, the stigma associated with being an orphan as well as a compromised sense of self-worth, coupled with cultural norms that limit open discussion about sexuality, undermine orphans' ability to refuse sex or to negotiate the terms of sexual relationships. Notwithstanding this evidence, little is known about the extent and nature of sexual violence orphans encounter within the schooling system, particularly in the context of high levels of gender-based violence in schools. In particular, the unique vulnerability of orphans to sexual violence in and around schools has not been explored in depth (Mkandawire, Luginaah, and Baxter 2014). To examine these issues, this study therefore used photovoice as a transformative pedagogy to work with orphans to explore their vulnerability in the context of sexual violence in and around their school.

## **Sexual violence in and around South African schools**

Sexual violence in South Africa is undoubtedly one of the greatest tragedies of the post-apartheid period (Gouws 2018). The country has among the highest incidence of sexual assault in the world. Over 49,000 sexual assault offences (including rape, sexual assault, contact sexual assault, and attempted sexual offences) were

recorded by the South African Police Services (SAPS) in the last year (SAPS 2017). Yet, only one out of every twenty rape cases are reported to the police annually in the country (Naidoo 2013). It is therefore, possible that over one million sexual offences occur in a single year.

The low reporting of sexual offences has been associated with poor knowledge of what constitutes sexual violence. An Amnesty International (2008) study found that women in the South African provinces of KZN and Mpumalanga were unaware of their right to seek help or lay a charge for the sexual abuse they had experienced. Given low levels of knowledge about sexual violence, girls and boys in poor urban or rural contexts tend to be especially vulnerable to such violence (Moynihan et al. 2018).

The extent of violence in communities is reflected in, and impacts negatively on what happens in schools (Mncube and Harber 2013). Unequal gender relations within communities create fertile ground for sexual violence against learners (Moletsane 2014). Thus, learners in schools located in communities characterised by high levels of gender violence are particularly vulnerable to such violence (Burton and Leoschut 2012).

Sexual violence in and around schools is increasingly documented as a major challenge for learners and, in particular, girls (Bhana 2012; Ngidi and Moletsane 2015). In this context, girls often lack the skills and confidence to negotiate healthy relationships, and especially safe sexual relationships with boys and men (Bhana 2012). This leads to negative health and education outcomes, which have the potential to affect not just schooling, but the future prospects of girls (Moletsane 2014).

## Theoretical framework

Our work in this study was informed by Mezirow's (1996) Transformative Learning Theory, which views learning as a process of development, in which learners or participants use their existing understandings of a situation to imagine or develop new interpretations (Mezirow 1996). From this perspective, participants (in this case, orphaned learners) are viewed as active critical thinkers, who are capable of understanding their experiences and thinking about alternatives. Informed by this framework, we sought to use a transformative pedagogy as part of our research methodology. Transformative pedagogy seeks to engage learners as critical and creative thinkers who are capable of identifying and grounding their own issues related to the phenomenon under study, in this case, sexual violence (Burns 2015). It fosters collaborative learning and empowers students to think creatively and critically (Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman 2010). What is more, it can be useful for creating 'safe spaces' in which learners' experiences are validated (Ngidi and Moletsane 2015).

Borrowing from Freire's work, Elenes (2001) asserts that transformative pedagogy endeavours to liberate individual thinking and facilitate a process whereby the student unlearns previously held beliefs and ideologies. In the context of sexual violence, the methodology endeavoured to facilitate a process of thinking in which orphaned learners critically reflected on their attitudes, knowledge, experiences and beliefs regarding sexual violence. In addition, the approach enabled participants to imagine actions or solutions to the problem and to reflect on these. The reflective

dimension was nurtured through educational processes, which then lead to addressing the problem (i.e., sexual violence) and social transformation (Nagda, Gurin and Lopez 2003)

Central to our study, particularly the use of photovoice as a transformative pedagogical tool, was the need to create safe spaces for orphaned learners to critically engage and dialogue about their vulnerability to sexual violence. This is in line with one of the aims of transformative education; namely, that it should resonate with transforming violent cultures and facilitate safety and security. We sought to engage the participants in work that examined dominant norms about sexual violence, and how best to understand and address it. Adopting this framework and using photovoice as a transformative pedagogical tool, we draw on the experiences and contexts of orphaned learners in order to explore their vulnerability to sexual violence in and around their school.

### **Photovoice as a research technique**

Photovoice is a participatory research approach developed in the 1990s (Wang 1999) as a 'tool for working with communities to ground emerging issues in the communities' own definitions of their concerns' (Peabody 2013, 252). The method places cameras in the hands of members of a community with acknowledgement that their perspectives are valuable and necessary to understanding a particular problem (Molloy 2007). When used effectively, it enables participants to document their lives and activities through photography (Mitchell, de Lange, and Nguyen 2016). Photovoice has been instrumental in prioritising the 'voices' of community members and enabling them to use visual evidence to recognise and speak about their problems and possible solutions (Wang 1999). In this study, photovoice was chosen for its potential not only to engage orphan learners in analysing their vulnerability to sexual violence, but also for its significant element of 'having fun' (Moletsane et al. 2007). The approach was also useful in giving the participant learners the freedom to decide on the aspects of the research topic that mattered to them. It also helped the learners decide for themselves what they felt was important to discuss with ourselves as researchers.

### **Study site and research context**

This article was developed from a larger ethnographic inquiry<sup>1</sup> which explored orphaned learners' vulnerability to sexual violence in and around *Siyaphambili*,<sup>2</sup> a secondary school serving the INK townships. *Siyaphambili* is located in the centre of the INK townships and attracts learners from all three communities. Safety is a major concern for these communities and high levels of crime and violence have been recorded by the police (SAPS 2017). Police stations in these communities are among the twenty that report the highest incidence of crime and violence against women and children nationally (South African Police Services (SAPS) 2017). Just as disconcerting is the fact that the incidence of sexual abuse in schools within the INK townships is among the highest in the country (Ngidi and Moletsane 2015). *Siyaphambili* is classified as a quintile two,<sup>3</sup> no-fee-paying institution which enrolls

learners from low-income households. Not-for-profit organisations donate daily meals and provide school uniforms and stationery for needy learners. An informal settlement<sup>4</sup> is situated adjacent to the school. At the time of data generation, residents of the informal settlement could obtain access into the school grounds through holes in the perimeter fence, further increasing learners' vulnerability to violence.

## Participants and data generation

Twenty seven learners identified as orphans and attending *Siyaphambili* School were selected from grades eight to 10. Learners were purposively sampled from the school with the help of a Life Orientation (LO) teacher.<sup>5</sup> The LO teacher assisted in compiling a list of learners who were known to have had lost both their biological parents, and these learners were subsequently invited to an after school meeting where the study was explained in detail – including ethics and consent issues. Interested learners were thereafter invited to participate in the study. Their caregivers provided written informed consent and the participants gave written assent for their participation. The final sample comprised 13 female and 14 male learners, ranging in age from 14 to 17 years (mean age = 16).

In the study, we used a participatory workshop approach to generate data. Photovoice workshops were held on the school premises.<sup>6</sup> The first workshop focused on learning about photovoice, with learners being introduced to the approach, visual ethics to guide their work, and the type of ethically sound pictures they could capture to reflect their personal experiences and understandings. A second workshop was dedicated to taking photographs. In it, the learners worked in pairs or groups of three. With the exception of two mixed sex pairs, most of the learners chose to work in single sex pairs/groups. They were given the following prompt: *As an orphan, take pictures representing what sexual violence looks like in and around your school environment.* They were first asked to discuss in their group what sort of pictures they wanted to take in and around their school. Once they agreed on what they wanted to photograph, they set off to take staged pictures in and around the school. This process of taking pictures took approximately two hours. As a safety precaution, we worked with two adult research assistants who accompanied those learners who ventured outside the school grounds in order to take their photographs.

The photographs were then printed at the workshop venue and the learners, using A3 paper, glue and colour pens, gave each of their photographs a caption. Using these captioned photographs, the pairs/groups created poster narratives describing their experiences of sexual violence in and/or around the school. The posters were exhibited (with the participants and researchers as the audience), with a combined curatorial statement<sup>7</sup> accompanying the exhibition. Each group/pair was then asked to present and explain their poster narratives to the whole group. These presentations, collectively lasting for one hour and 30 minutes, opened up a space for the participants to make further inputs about sexual violence in and around the school.

Discussions were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim and then translated into English for analysis. It is possible that some meanings may have been lost in translation but to mitigate this the first author, who is a first language isiZulu speaker, read and re-read the translations to ensure accuracy.

In this paper, we draw upon individual pictures to highlight emerging themes in participants' representations of sexual violence. Data analysis is influenced by John Fiske's (1994) three sites of production. The first site is the photograph as the primary text. We present a sample of photographs to illustrate some of the findings from the study. The second site involves what the producers of the photographs (i.e. the participants) said about their images. In this case, we analyse the captions of each of the pictures, the poster narratives and the transcripts of the presentations the participants made on their poster narratives. The third site of analysis involves what the audience (those who view the images) say about the image. We analysed the transcripts of the discussions and audience responses to the pictures and poster narratives during and after the exhibitions. We coded the data into broad themes and then used a thematic approach to organise the data from the transcripts into themes that responded to our research objectives and to organise the findings presented in the next section.

## Findings

In our analysis, the visual material produced through the use of photovoice became a journey into witnessing orphaned learners experiences. Significantly, a young male participant described the photographs as 'another way of seeing' sexual violence. In this section we draw from the participants' photographs to highlight the themes revealed in the poster narratives they created. What was immediately evident was the victimisation of girls both in and outside the school (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** A boy who is trying to force a girl to kiss him.



What is more, the photographs<sup>8</sup> showed how girls were at risk in all of the areas they used in and around school. These included the classrooms, toilets and corridors, as well as on the streets, in the bushes and even at home. We present this data under three major themes: picturing the self in sexual violence, capturing post-assault pain, isolation and loneliness, and constructing care and support.<sup>9</sup>

### *Picturing the self in sexual violence*

How did the orphaned learners position themselves in photographs about sexual violence? Participants used photovoice to locate themselves as victims, perpetrators and/or witnesses of violence. From their images, and in line with other studies (e.g., Phasha 2008), girls were mostly photographed as victims, while teachers, adult men and boys were pictured as the instigators or perpetrators of sexual violence. The victimisation of girls was depicted in staged pictures that revealed the instigators trying to fondle, grope and undress as well as pulling or pushing girls (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The boy pulls down the zip of her skirt because he wants to rape her.

Other photographs showed boys lifting girls off the ground and/or trying to touch them without their consent. Discussing one photograph, one girl described occasions when a boy would often harass her by attempting to undress or fondle her breasts:

One of the boys in my class always goes under my desk and tries to untie my skirt. Sometimes he puts his hands on my breasts. Whenever I try to stop him he just laughs and says "*ngizidlalisela wena nje*" ("I am just playing with you"). I've become so tired of fighting him against this, so I just look at him now. (Palesa, Grade 10)

The quotation above suggests how the boy feels entitled to girls' bodies and therefore can touch them as he wishes. Furthermore, his actions illustrate how dominant gender norms are constructed, performed and sustained within the school setting. The boy's excuse that he was 'just playing' may be indicative of the ways in which sexual violence is normalised and how, for

some boys, it forms part of their daily 'playful' interaction with girls. For him, sexual harassment is a form of 'sport' to which girls should not object. Linked to the above, the boy's laughter illustrates the casualness with which he perceives the incident. He does not perceive his actions as harmful or serious, and believes that they should be not subject to objection or condemnation.

In comparison, the girl's reaction (or lack thereof) to the boy's advances may demonstrate the helplessness girls often feel when they encounter sexual harassment. The expectation and frequent occurrence of harassment in girls' lives robs them of the tools to speak out or fight against their abuse. For the girl, sexual violence is a norm she cannot escape; her only means of dealing with this violation is to remain silent. This further speaks to how girls are socialised into becoming submissive beings; they accept their predicament with silence even when they are being violated.

Other photographs, such as [Figure 3](#), were of boys beating girls at school. This exemplifies how boys use socially sanctioned power to harm, intimidate, silence and control girls' behaviour. Furthermore, the physical assault of girls shows the ways in which boys demonstrate their masculinity and how this subsequently has adverse consequences for girls.



**Figure 3.** A boy trying to touch a girl intimately without her consent.

In line with findings from other studies (see for example, Fay and Medway 2006), during discussion of the photographs the male participants in our study demonstrated an acceptance of violence against girls. They defended their actions by objectifying girls' bodies and suggesting that girls' clothing enticed boys. One young man stated that:

It is the way that women dress that turns us on, and we know that boys can't control their need for sex. It is their short skirts, the way they walk, and speak to us as boys that is enticing. So, it is not our fault (Sibusiso, male, 16 years, grade 10).

This assertion speaks to the persistent threat of sexual violence and its negative impact on girls. It also leaves the burden of dealing with this violence squarely on girls as they remain

blamed for their own abuse. According to the boys, it is girls' responsibility to prevent themselves from being sexually assaulted through, for example, dressing 'appropriately' and changing their behaviour when around boys.

To further support this view, a number of pictures were of girls wearing short skirts or shirts that revealed their cleavage. These photographs carried the pervasive narrative that girls who are harassed or raped bring it upon themselves by wearing short and/or revealing clothing. The photographs suggest that for girls, wearing revealing clothing in and around school places them in danger of being sexually harassed or even raped. However, even in the photographs where girls wore clothing that covered their bodies, they remained vulnerable to sexual abuse. What is more, the girls used these pictures to condemn other girls for wearing revealing clothing; suggesting that they 'invited' sexual harassment upon themselves.

Surprisingly, in a context where homophobia is rife and talking about same-sex relationships is taboo, a few pictures showed same-sex sexual violence – in which older boys assaulted younger boys and older girls harassed young girls at school. For example, the girls lamented how older girls harassed them – by fondling their buttocks and/or breasts in the toilets and even hitting them for resisting these advances. Although there were only two photographs that showed girl-on-girl sexual violence, the threat for younger girls cannot be ignored. This is particularly because younger girls highlighted how '[we] don't like what they do. It really saddens us'. This further speaks to girls' vulnerability and the lack of agency to address violence in any of its forms.



**Figure 4.** Boys don't respect you when they see you in the toilet.

Figure 4 above is one of a set of three. One picture shows a young boy being pushed inside a toilet, another shows him being forcefully undressed and the third is of the perpetrator trying to fondle him. Participants described this as a 'common occurrence usually at the start of the academic year' (Mfundo, male, grade 8). Speaking of his experiences, Danone, a 14 year old grade 8 boy, asserted:

[...] they do it even in our classrooms and corridors. They don't listen when we try to stop them, they just threaten with beating us. So we keep quiet. But it is worse in the toilets, that's why I don't go there no matter how pressed I am.

Mvula, a 16 year old grade 10 boy, described this behaviour by older boys at school as a way of '*[u]kufikisa abafana abancane besikole*' (initiating young school boys). This sexual initiation, as Langa (2010) found in a photovoice study on young masculinities, is perhaps used to demonstrate supremacy and control while silencing and 'setting the record straight' for younger boys who are new to the secondary school setting.

Initiation practices inside the school are common and more so at the start of the academic year (Collins 2013). What is disturbing is that teachers and other adult school stakeholders find this violent behaviour permissible and encourage it among boys as a way to 'toughen' up boys perceived as 'sissies' (Collins 2013). While these initiation practices often take the form of physical violence and emotional bullying, our study found that they also manifested in sexual overtones, whereby sexual violence (or the threat of it) was used as a weapon to subdue, disempower and control. In the context of boy-on-boy violence, sexual assault sends a very clear message that older boys are entitled to the bodies of those perceived as less powerful. These important findings suggest that, for both girls and boys in lower school grades, sexual violence is often an inescapable reality.

We asked participants whether or not experiences of sexual violence were common across both orphaned and non-orphaned learners. The answer was an overwhelming no. The participants argued that orphans tended to be hardest hit by violence generally, and sexual violence in particular. Speaking about this, one participant argued that:

When you are an orphan you are not safe anywhere and there is nobody to talk to. When you experience something like rape you don't have a parent to go cry to. Nobody believes you. So you are not safe at home, you are not safe when you walk in the street, you are not even safe at school because some of these teachers and boys harass us. (Mary, female, 14 years, grade 9).

As suggested in this quote, while sexual violence is experienced by learners across the spectrum, for orphans this kind of violence is especially devastating since they lack the safety net of a parent figure, thus lowering the likelihood of reporting victimisation. According to one participant, reporting and speaking about this issue would have been less strenuous had she had parental security and assurance. The threat of assault even from teachers illustrates a critical lack of caregiving for orphans. When orphans are assaulted, as the same participant elaborated, there is little psychosocial support of the kind often provided by parents. Furthermore, the role of teachers within this context shifts from that of caregiving to that of aggressor. Orphans often have no one to speak to about their victimisation, especially when we consider that reporting sexual violence in South Africa is already very low among young people (Artz et al. 2016).

### ***Capturing post-assault pain, isolation and loneliness***

The impact of sexual violence on individuals was illustrated in photographs depicting pain, isolation and loneliness. These emotions were illustrated in photographs of victims crying with their heads bent down between their knees. This gesture perhaps illustrated

the isolation, guilt, shame and humiliation felt by the victims. It suggests that the victim may be trying to hide and be invisible, signifying that their self-image was shattered and their self-esteem lowered. For the orphaned victim, it signified a second negative turn from a 'normal' life: the first being the death of their parents, while the second is experiencing sexual violence.

Another set of pictures depicted the victim's loneliness, which was further associated with being an orphan (Figure 5). As discussed above, participants felt that, as orphans, they did not have a safety net in which to speak about their victimisation. They also found it difficult to trust anyone. Because these children did not have parental support, their immediate psychological defence system was what Sigurdardottir and Halldorsdottir (2013) call the 'personal protective line'. This means that the orphan only trust and rely upon themselves for care and support. Unfortunately, the experience of sexual violence breaks down this defence system and renders the orphan learner defenceless and prone to more violence.



**Figure 5.** This girl is crying because she has just been raped.

Duma, Mekwa and Denny (2007) write about the mental paralysis felt immediately after an experience of sexual assault. They describe it as a moment when the victim feels powerless emotionally and physically. Sigurdardottir and Halldorsdottir (2013) point out that when a victim freezes, they are likely to be experiencing shame and guilt because they could not protect themselves against assault. Such freezing is an emergency response enacted by a victim experiencing trauma in order to survive that particular trauma. In this study, the victims depicted in photographs showing loneliness were sitting alone either at a site described as that where the perpetration occurred, such as a bushy area, or in an empty classroom.

The pictures of victims sitting in empty classrooms were also telling. They suggested that victims were experiencing a breakaway from social life (victims were depicted as being isolated and lonely), what we see as a sort of a 'suppression of feelings'. Here, the orphan no longer relates to his/her social peers and finds it difficult to return to their previous social life.

A feeling of distress dominates their lives and anxiety and sadness is the norm both in and outside the school. Again, the participants linked this to their orphanhood, arguing that they had nobody to go to after experiencing sexual violence. They saw their extended family members as unreliable and untrustworthy, and their teachers or peers difficult to engage with. These emotions were described by one participant as follows:

I felt a sense of loneliness and isolation, I also felt sad as though I had been robbed and insulted as well as belittled especially since we [girls] with no parents are the most vulnerable to being abused since we are defenceless and with no real support. (Zanele, girl, 15 years, Grade 9).

As Bramsen et al. (2013) argue, trauma is common after experiencing child sexual abuse. By highlighting her vulnerability as an orphan, the girl quoted above saw her victimisation as urgent and pressing since she had no support structure. She described her experience as being 'robbed', 'insulted' and 'belittled'; suggesting that sexual abuse had altered her life. Her use of terms such as 'defenceless' and 'with no real support' were indicative of the diminished role of caregivers and the extended family in providing care and support to orphans, particularly where sexual violence is concerned.

The lack of an essential support system for orphans reporting an assault was also reported by participants based on their lived experiences. Zanele (cited above) related an experience when she reported to her extended family that her cousin had repeatedly assaulted her. Instead of holding the cousin to account, the family scolded and blamed Zanele for trying to divide the family. The consequences of such secondary victimisation are often fear, helplessness and terror – the same first-hand emotions experienced by a victim of sexual assault. Research by Malloy and Lyon (2006) on child sexual abuse found that children's willingness to disclose their victimisation was affected by their caregiver's willingness to believe that the abuse did occur. In the case of Zanele and other orphans in our study, her family's negative reaction to reporting her abuse meant that she was no longer comfortable to speak about her experiences even amongst relatives. What was left of her 'voice' after the repeated assaults was completely shattered by not being believed or supported by her caregivers (see also Collings 2005). According to Malloy and Lyon (2006), researchers consider a caregivers' reaction to a child's report of sexual abuse as a means of assessing the child's family as either a good or bad support system for the child. The caregivers' belief that abuse occurred is important for the child's future safety and wellbeing. As evidenced by Zanele's narrative, families and caregivers were often neither willing to accept that the abuse had occurred nor report abuse to social services, thus creating dead-end-disclosure. Dead-end-disclosure, according to Malloy and Lyon (2006), occurs when a victim of sexual violence decides to no longer report her victimisation because family members do not believe her. Because of the forced silence surrounding their sexual abuse, coupled with their status as orphans, participants in this study reported feeling invisible.

### ***Constructing care and support***

Participants took pictures illustrating care and support in the context of sexual violence. These photographs often included another person such as a fellow learner, friend/peer, a counsellor and/or a teacher. What was striking about them was the fact that caregiving



had a 'female face'. This is in line with Bhana's (2015) findings that care and support in the context of sexual violence tend to be gendered and embedded within the discourse of mothering. For example, female friends were pictured as primary sources of support and re-insertion back into social life. Even male participants believed that care and support should come from a female peer. For example, in one picture, a victim of school-based sexual assault was being embraced by a female friend (Figure 6). The caption for the picture stated that 'this [picture] shows that they are emotional(ly) support(ing) and comforting each other when [one is] in pain (sic)'.



**Figure 6.** Emotionally supporting and comforting each other.

Studies have found that if children speak about their victimisation, they often do so first to their biological mothers (van Toledo and Seymour 2013). In the absence of a female parent, the orphaned participants in this study reported that their next line of support was their peers. This was because they expected non-supportive attitudes from their caregivers. Care and support from friends was important not only in the aftermath of sexual abuse, but also in encouraging victims to further disclose to social services.

Likewise, some female teachers were perceived as offering reliable support at school. Discussing their photos of care and support, participants felt that a few female teachers were more trustworthy to talk to rather than family members and police officers, including female police officers. One picture showed a teacher alongside another learner comforting a girl who had been sexually abused. Discussing this particular picture, Charlize, a 14 year old grade 9 girl, explained that, 'home is the most dangerous place. I prefer going to speak to a female teacher when I have a problem.'

It is striking that orphans envisioned their care and support as coming from outside their homes. Research shows how parental support is positively associated with emotional and behavioural adjustment after experiencing sexual violence. Thus, in a context

where there are no parents, orphans often have to rely on people who are not their kin. As Bhana (2015) found, in the context of orphanhood and poverty, teachers are often the only adult resource with whom orphans can negotiate social protection against sexual violence as well as care and support.

Other participants emphasised the importance of 'showing sympathy and offering support to each other' after experiencing sexual abuse. As orphans, participants felt that they needed extra care and support, especially when sexual violence carries a heavy burden of stigma, discrimination and shame. For them, the only means to speak about their victimisation was through talking among themselves as orphans or with female teachers. This suggests the need for social connectedness and for institutions such as schools to provide all children, including orphaned youth, with a clearer sense of belonging.

## Conclusion

Located within transformative learning theory, this study used photovoice to research sexual violence against orphaned learners in and around school. This creative and 'fun' methodology (particularly for the young people in this study) placed orphaned learners at the centre of the research, allowing them a safe space to explore and represent their experiences of sexual violence. In essence, the methodology engaged these orphaned learners as both knowers and actors (Oakley 2002). Their photographs enabled them to make what is often invisible, visible (Russell and Diaz 2013), and made knowledge that is often silenced, spoken. Notably, in addition to enabling the participants to analyse their situation in the context of sexual violence in and around their school, the approach also facilitated critical thinking about the injustices they face, as well as about an alternative situation in which they are supported, albeit by peers and female teachers, outside their homes.

The research findings suggest that while sexual violence is prevalent in and around schools in South Africa, with the absence of biological parents, orphaned learners are particularly vulnerable to this form of abuse. Furthermore, in the context of unequal gender relations in families, communities and institutions, the threat against girls tends to be particularly pronounced. Participants saw the school, often viewed as a place of safety outside the home, as dangerous and unsafe for orphaned learners. They reported sexual violence as severely compromising their physical and psychological wellbeing, with feelings of shame, guilt and isolation replacing the care and support they need from caregivers and peers. Our findings suggest that in a complex environment where these children live under the daily threat of violence and must survive under the shadow of severe socioeconomic shortages, their orphanhood renders them vulnerable to violence generally and to sexual violence in particular. Compounded by the absence of biological parents, limited family care and other support systems, this leaves them with little or no support or care from their homes or the school.

Linked to this, and the pervasiveness of sexual violence in communities, it is significant for us that the participants did not, in their narratives, talk about an alternative situation in which sexual violence did not exist. Rather, they seemed to accept it as inevitable, and their only recourse as existing in the care and support of peers and teachers. In hindsight, we should have probed this finding further to understand the reasons for it and to facilitate discussion that challenge the unequal social and gender norms that produce the violence. While this paper only offers a glimpse into orphaned learners' experiences and understandings of sexual



violence in and around school, it provides a foundation for future research that could address this question and others.

Yet, the findings from the study also highlight the potential for important forms of support, including through peers and female teachers, which must be recognised and reinforced. Given their shared experiences, participants also identified the potential for caring and supportive relationships among themselves as a group. This has implications for future school-based interventions aimed at developing and nurturing such relationships.

## Notes

1. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education and the school's management further gave their permission to conduct the study.
2. *Siyaphambili* is a pseudonym given to the school under study.
3. Public schools in South Africa are categorised into quintiles based on the poverty of the communities they serve, with quintile 1 schools serving the poorest and quintile 5 serving the least poor communities. Schools in quintiles 1–3 have been declared no-fee schools, while quintiles 4 and 5 are fee paying schools.
4. The informal settlement comprised corrugated iron shacks and basic two-roomed low-cost houses built by the government.
5. The teacher was also tasked by the school's management to cater for vulnerable learners and assist with referring them to social support services outside the school.
6. Workshops were held over weekends and school holidays so as to not interrupt academic programmes at the school.
7. A curatorial statement was written by the participants to further explain and give meaning to their poster narratives.
8. The photographs are all staged and do not represent actual occurrences of sexual violence.
9. We use pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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